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ED 020 545 CG 002 122

A "SYSTEMS" APPROACH TO THE "SCHOOL UNDERACHIEVER."

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EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.60 13P.

DESCRIPTORS- CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED, *UNDERACHIEVERS, *DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, *SYSTEMS ANALYSIS, SYSTEMS APPROACH, SOCIAL SYSTEMS, *CASE STUDIES (EDUCATION),

USING A CONCEPTUAL MODEL DRAWN FROM SYSTEMS-ORIENTED THINKING AND RESEARCH IN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, A LIMITED NUMBER OF SCHOOL UNDERACHIEVEMENT PROBLEMS WERE ANALYZED. SCHOOL UNDERACHIEVERS ARE VIEWED AS BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS TRANSACTING WITH A VARIETY OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS. THEREFORE, THE FOCUS IS ON FINDING PROBLEM-PRODUCING ELEMENTS IN THE TOTAL SYSTEM. SINCE INTERACTION WITH A SOCIAL SYSTEM IS BEST UNDERSTOOD IN ITS DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT, THE UNDERACHIEVER'S BEHAVIOR IS STUDIED IN TWO WAYS--(1) AS IT REFLECTS HIS DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS, AND (2) AS IT REFLECTS DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS OF INTERACTING ENVIRONMENTAL SYSTEMS. CASES REPRESENTING POSSIBLE TYPES OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT ARE PRESENTED. THESE CASES DEMONSTRATE A SYSTEMS AND DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH IN THE SOLUTION. RECOMMENDATIONS ARE BASED ON AN ANALYSIS OF THE SYSTEM IN WHICH CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN LIVE, AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL DEFICITS PRODUCED. CHANGES ARE NEEDED WITHIN THE SCHOOL, FOR IT IS THE SYSTEM DESIGNATED TO COPE WITH THESE PROBLEMS. (PH)

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The Office of Education has recently defined the underachiever as one whose observed performance, as judged either by grades or achievement test scores, is significantly below his measured or demonstrated potentials for academic achievement. Though this definition is something of an oversimplification and subject to question (6), there is little doubt that underachievement ranks high as a referral symptom. Yet, how are we to evaluate and subsequently, to modify children and youth manifesting such behavior?

The present paper will modify, somewhat, the traditional definition of underachievement and will suggest an approach for evaluating this problem, with brief remarks regarding treatment. Specifically, we will attempt to analyze a limited number of school underachievement problems within a conceptual model drawn from two sources: (1) current "systems"-oriented thinking in the community mental health field; and, (2) theory and research in the area of developmental psychology. Then an attempt will be made to apply the model to several cases drawn from our experience at the Community Guidance Center, a community mental health-oriented facility, located in San Antonio, Texas.

However, before presenting the conceptual frame of reference in detail, it should be noted that the label "underachiever" merely categorizes and summarizes an observable pattern of behavior. As such, the symptoms of underachievement cannot be linked to any one particular set of etiological factors. Rather, the behavior patterns of the underachiever must be looked at as the

possible outcome of any number of different, underlying, causative factors. To understand the meaning of underachievement, one must assess the unique factors which go into producing such a pattern of behavior; and to attain this individualized understanding, we find it useful to analyze underachievement within a model employing both "systems" and developmental notions.

Let us look first at the "systems" aspect of the approach. Within general systems theory, the term "system" has been defined as a complex of components in mutual interaction. Recent writers, such as Nicholas Hobbs (4) and Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (3), have utilized this abstraction in analyzing the problems of emotional disturbance. They suggest that emotional disturbance arises in response to certain "systems", within which the individual functions. Essentially, this is a "field" approach, focusing on present transactions between the individual and his total environment, while not denying an historical process in the development of emotional disorder. Additionally, the "systems" approach aims toward modification of the total "system", not merely toward modification of the individual within the "system".

In our case, school underachievers are viewed as biological systems transacting with a number of social systems, including certain socio-cultural, family, and peer-group systems. To understand underachievement, we focus on the total "system", looking for historical and current problem-producing elements in the underachiever's interaction with his particular "systems".

Now let us turn to the developmental features of the model. Incorporation of concepts related to emotional and cognitive development is crucial, for a symptom pattern generated by the individual's interaction with any social "system", is best understood when placed in its proper developmental context. Development is not purely a process of unfolding; but rather, occurs via interaction between the individual, a biological and psychological continuum, and his environmental "systems" (1). Thus, the underachiever's behavior can be studied in at least two ways; namely, (1) as it reflects the developmental levels of the underachiever himself and (2) as it reflects the developmental levels of interacting environmental "systems".

In order to make this concept, strategy clearer, let us examine the "systems" and developmental status of several examples of underachievement. To accomplish this end, we will present three cases that represent three possible types of "underachievement".

The first case represents the more traditional view. It involves a 16-year old, sophomore boy, who, despite his ability to score within the "Average" range on standardized IQ tests, had passed only one freshman course. John was failing the majority of his course work, and had always lagged behind in school. He was described by the school as "lacking in self-confidence, unable to concentrate on school work, and unable to express his thoughts". Here is an overt pattern of underachievement; but what lies behind this behavior?

Socio-cultural factors apparently did not contribute to the boy's problem, for his middle-class family had immersed him from birth in an adequately stimulating environment. The family seemed stable, but sterile, with all members appearing to function in frozen roles. The group consisted of Mrs. T, a nagging, overdominating mother; Mr. T, who provided well, but remained emotionally aloof; John, an obese, "foot-dragging", childish adolescent; and a 13-year old sister, who occupied the "well-sibling" position.

Looking at this interacting family "system" from a developmental point of view, we found that John engaged in some activities suggestive of appropriate emotional development, such as maintaining a paper route. However, the majority of his behavior seemed dominated by a passive-aggressive struggle, primarily with the mother, but also involving related fields of battle, such as the area of school achievement. That this struggle was not merely the healthy, adolescent rebellion was quickly ascertained from John's behavior; for example, his frequent, tantrum-like crying jags, when frustrated, and his child-like plan to solve his educational difficulties by "grabbing the school records from the counselor's hands and tearing them up". John's father, when forced by events to exercise leadership, seemed to encourage the boy's passive-aggressive resistance by openly criticizing Mrs. T's management techniques. However, he would soon retreat to his own passive-aggressive styles of behavior. Needless to say, the mother-father interaction was not characterized by open communication or intimacy.

But how did this malfunctioning "system" come about? To understand this, we must examine the strengths and weaknesses in the parents' own natural history of emotional development. John's mother had grown up in a family consisting of a cold, unavailable stepmother and a father who turned his attention from Mrs. T to her younger stepbrother. Mrs. T strove hard, without success, to regain the favor of her father, and strongly resented her brother's intrusion. Her apparent difficulty in early object relations seemed to contribute much to her failure to consolidate an appropriate identification during adolescence. When forced by marriage into the role of wife and mother, she apparently dealt with her feelings of inadequacy by adopting an overdominating, nagging style of behavior. On the other hand, Mr. T grew up in a family consisting of a hard-working, aggressive father, who died early, and a controlling, domineering mother. Though Mr. T had achieved some degree of vocational adaptation, apparently, he had not achieved satisfactory emotional emancipation from his mother, appeared not to have consolidated a firm, masculine sex-role identification, and seemed unable to exercise an effective father-husband role with any consistent determination. In fact, his wife's attempts at control only led to increased passive resistance and emotional withdrawal. Hence, developmental deficiencies appeared to prevent mature adjustment in the parental dyad and seemed to set the stage for John's developmental arrest.

On the basis of this assessment of the family's "system", we initiated a brief team-family therapy program, adapted from the Multiple Impact Therapy model (5). In the treatment process, the family became mobilized. Roles and patterns of interaction and communication began to shift. Mr. T became more involved and effective in his role as father. Mrs. T became more comfortable in the roles of mother and wife, and ceased her nagging. John's behavior became more age-typical and his grades improved.

The second case represents what we might label as "pseudo-underachievement". Here, George, age 16, was classified as a ninth-grader in a regular classroom situation. However, he was so classified only because of continued social promotion; not because of adequate academic performance. On the surface, much of George's behavior resembled the typical case of underachievement. However, analysis of socio-cultural factors showed a middle-class family, with middle-class values. Analysis of the family constellation revealed a stable, apparently emotionally-healthy family, with parents who could accept their son's failure to achieve in school, but who could not understand why he continued to do so poorly. Emotionally, the boy appeared surprisingly sound, and certainly, manifested developmentally-appropriate behavior. However, evaluation revealed a language disorder, which was preventing the boy from effective functioning. Here, developmental and "systems" analysis helped to eliminate possible emotional causes for underachievement and led, finally, to an adequate diagnosis of the defect

in the boy's internal system. Intervention, after proper diagnosis, involved uniting the school and Vocational Rehabilitation as cooperating, coping networks, and from there the boy was channelled into appropriate vocational training.

The third type of school underachiever, whom we shall label as the "Cultural Underachiever", does not fit at all within the traditional definition of underachievement, stressing, as it does, the disjunction between performance and ability within the individual. The "Cultural Underachiever" often does not demonstate average ability, and his achievement certainly falls far below school standards. To label the "Cultural Underachiever" as a species of underachievement, the traditional definition must be stretched to include the disjunction between ability level and manifest school performance in culturally-disadvantaged groups. The traditional definition is recast to include the disjunction between both performance and ability between groups. In this sense, children and adolescents whose social and cultural background does not actuate their potential for academic achievement will be considered underachievers.

This example is one involving a case of "cultural underachievement", as defined above. However, before describing the case I would like to borrow from D. P. Ausubel (2) and consider his analysis of the socio-cultural system within which such a boy lives and the effects such a system might

produce. Ausubel feels that deficiency in cognitive development is cumulative in nature, since current and future rates of intellectual growth are always conditioned or limited by the attained level of development. The child who has an existing deficit in cognitive growth, incurred from past deprivation, is less able to profit, developmentally, from new and more advanced levels of developmental stimulation.

Regarding modification, Ausubel states that, at least theoretically, one could hypothesize that an optimal learning environment could arrest or reverse, in part, the existing degree of cognitive retardation. Such an environment must obviously be adequately stimulating; must be geared to the deprived individual's particular level of readiness in subject matter and intellectual skill; and must presuppose much individualized attention and guided remedial effort. In actual practice, his existing intellectual deficit is usually compounded by the fact that he is less able than his peers to profit from appropriate new experience. He is also usually overwhelmed by exposure to learning tasks that far exceed his level of cognitive readiness. Hence, he fails, loses self-confidence in his ability to learn, becomes thoroughly demoralized in the school situation, and finally, disinvolves himself from it. As Ausubel points out, these latter motivational and emotional consequences of school failure obviously add further to the existing deficiency in intellectual development. Thus, we see that an analysis of such cases has to focus on socio-cultural factors and that the

problem is extremely complex, involving cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors.

Our case is one of a 17-year old, bilingual, Mexican-American boy, from a family of fourteen. Juan had achieved a ninth-grade placement, but considering his age, he was showing a significant degree of educational retardation. He had recently begun to associate with a problem peer group, to act out as a discipline problem at school, and finally, decided to drop out of school. He came to our Clinic for evaluation only because the teacher had insisted, almost to the point of forcing the boy through the Clinic door. Although Juan was very angry and refused to comply with testing, he did reveal this about his "system". He started by stating that he was "too old" to be in school and was able to acknowledge that the school work, which previously had been within manageable limits, had become much harder since his entry into junior high school. Thus, it seemed that the boy's "cumulative cognitive deficit" was beginning to catch up with him. Also, he certainly did not appear to have a clear perception regarding the relationship between academic education and future vocational adjustment. In addition, Juan stated that his father, who had no education, was beginning to complain because of the necessary expense money which school required. Thus, one can see several cognitive, motivational, and even emotional factors entering into this youth's decision to drop out of school; to withdraw from the academic arena. However, no doubt, the

most significant factor of all was revealed when the boy stated, almost under his breath, "I'll never be nobody". I had the feeling that this was his way of expressing the defeatist motivation, which seems so often to be associated with this type of underachiever.

The "systems" and developmental problems underlying this boy's underachievement are rather obvious. However, what are we to do for him and other "cultural underachievers" like him? Intervention into his "system" should have started long before he reached the Clinic door; and, though indeed there are many emotional factors entering into Juan's problem behavior, doubtlessly, primary intervention should have come from the institutions charged with the education of this boy. But what could have been done?

Again, Ausubel (2) offers suggestions for early remediation which are in line with the developmental status and "system" within which such children can live. Not surprisingly, he argues that an optimal learning environment must be provided as early in the child's period of cognitive development as possible. Let us briefly summarize the elements he considers essential for providing such an optimal environment: (1) an enriched program of pre-school education emphasizing perceptual discrimination and language acquisition; (2) increased use of concrete, emperical props, such as audio-visual aids. and opportunities for direct physical manipulation of objects and situations in the presentatior of abstract ideas and relational propositions; (3) requiring that particular skills be mastered before new or

advanced tasks are introduced; (4) increased use of programmed instruction, in order to insure sequential arrangement and gradation of difficulty in line with the child's level of cognitive and emotional development; and finally, (5) a realistic recognition that it is necessary to set a double standard of education, at least during the early stages of preparing the culturally-deprived individual to cope with more advanced subject matter.

All these recommendations are based on an analysis of the "system" in which culturally-disadvantaged children live and the developmental deficits which this system produces. These recommendations imply that changes are needed within the "systems" designed to cope with these problems; namely, the school. We feel that had this boy come up through an educational system designed to cope with his particular developmental deficits in the area of cognition and motivation, he might never have whispered those finalizing words, "I'll never be nobody".

In summary, then, we have considered three cases which reflect a "systems" and developmental approach to particular problems of school underachievement. Actually, we feel that this strategy is not limited to underachievement, but that it can be useful in analyzing any overt symptom pattern.

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